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# Why young citizens keep away from politics<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The lack of participation of young people in politics is an endemic theme in the social sciences as well as in the popular media. Since ancient times, actually, young people have always been the focus of lament when they were compared to their older age cohorts. They were depicted as less engaged and involved in the public decision-making process. Young people just seem to take more distance from politics compared to older age groups. This life-cycle effect has been well documented in the social sciences today.

Recently though a new insight has emerged, namely the fact that the young generations of today are also substantially less engaged when compared to the older generations at the same young age. In other words, there are additional generational effects that portray young generations of today as particularly disaffected from the political process. The overall decline in political participation in many Western democracies is then to a large extent explained by the disproportionate disengagement of the young generations.

As a consequence, governments and NGOs have in the last decade started to think of possible remedies for the ailment of youth disengagement. From youth programs and publicity campaigns, to 'get out the vote' music tours, the topic is omnipresent in the youth policy of many Western countries. However, any efforts to treat the problem of youth disengagement need to be very well-informed as to the strategies and approaches that are most suitable for treating the sick patient. This article contributes to that effort through reaching hopefully a better understanding of youth disengagement. Unlike many previous studies, we do not look at how we can turn

seemingly apathetic young people into politically active citizens, instead, we focus on those who are tuned out in order to examine what it is that keeps them away from public life. We expect that the group of young non-engaged is actually more diversified than we commonly think; and we thus hope to uncover the different reasons for their disengagement. These findings will be relevant in order to move away from a tailor-made approach of a 'one-size-fits-all' policy designed to fit the profile of the engaged types.

For this research we use a combination of survey data as well as in-depth interviews from the Canadian Youth Survey (CYS 2006). Using both types of data of the CYS 2006, we inquired political attitudes and behaviors of young Canadians at the age of 15-20 years-old, as well as different factors likely to influence political participation. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods gives us more informed answers on our main research questions on how pervasive the phenomenon of youth disengagement is and which obstacles young people themselves experience in their way to full participation. Patterns of differences in their answers allow us to develop a typology of different forms of disengagement.

## Policy relevance

Some of the factors that prompt engagement have been researched now for several decades. Especially, individual socio-economic resources have been found to strongly influence civic and political engagement. In addition, researchers determined that a personal sense of efficacy and a general political interest have also beneficial effects. The problem with these findings is that resources, efficacy and political interest are not

easily shaped and influenced. There is a belief that civic education may be able to solve the problems of disengagement. In the USA, for example, civic education has already been a regular element of the curriculum for decades. Since the 1990s many countries in Europe like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands or Belgium have also taken it on as a mandatory element in their secondary education. Integrating civic lessons in to the curriculum alone is not the solution, however. Research has shifted from an earlier approach to teaching top-down political information about the functioning of democratic institutions, to more interactive lessons on political and civic dilemmas. Recent research on the role of civic education emphasises the importance of an open classroom atmosphere as well as the power of service learning. Although studies show some successful application of these new learning tools and approaches, the problem of youth disengagement is persistent, strong and rising.

In recent elections in Canada, for example, we found that fewer than twenty five percents of the 18-20 year olds found their way to the polling booth. If turnout habits persist throughout one's lifetime, as some researchers suggest, then, we might be faced with dire democratic prospects once this generation has reached full adulthood. Dwindling youth participation at the polls might prompt politicians to erase any concerns about youth issues from their campaign promises. It might be true and important to know that young people engage in politics in many new creative and innovative ways, but the point remains that the electoral process is still the most essential mechanism of political decision-making in democracies. Yet social science research still lacks powerful solutions to the dwindling interest in its participation. Turning to studying the non-engaged directly might thus be a promising avenue of investigation.

## Non-participation

Three main approaches explain the decline in participation of young people. The first line of thought claims that young people are just not

interested anymore and portrays a disengaged cynic youth which has low political knowledge. These claims are often backed up by research indicating that in effect young people are not really excited and often frankly negative about politics. But critics of this pessimistic view argue that it is especially parliamentary politics that young people frown upon, and that they still feel very strong about broad societal issues, even more positive and excited about some issues (e.g. gay rights or ecology) than previous generations. Other factors that discuss the similarity between party profiles, an increasingly cynical tone of the media, and the perceived lack of choice to change the power-elite are not powerful enough to explain why particularly the young generation tunes out of politics.

A second line in the literature is more grounded in empirical research and points especially to the resources that play an important role in the individuals' capacity to participate. Young people seem to increasingly lack those resources, and are less able to display political knowledge and efficacy. It is not clear though why this might be particularly a phenomenon of the young generation.

A last group of scholars points to structural changes in society. They argue that the current young generation experiences a different lifecycle than previous generations, which impedes participation at an early age. In this view, young generations of today might still participate later on in their lives. Adulthood has been delayed, and experiences of parenthood, home-ownership or work, that are related to more political participation, start later in life.

Instead of viewing them as rival hypotheses, our research uses these insights to discern different types of non-engagement within the group of young people.

## The study and the results

We first use the results of our qualitative study in order to understand the diversity among the non-

engaged. The advantage of our sampling strategy (i.e. selecting equally from the disengaged and engaged youth) is that we are able to reach the non-active youth for further interviews. We focused here particularly on the non-active individuals, and have analysed and sorted their interviews into different patterns, which led us to establish different portraits of disengagement. This typology will help us to expand the understanding of the reasons of non-participation among youth. Our main question is thus: why are young people not participating in political life?

### **Non-participants**

Contrary to what is often argued, few young people do not participate at all in society and politics. Indeed, we found that only a minority of the interviewees did not engage in any participatory action. In fact, quite a few participants had at least done one action, e.g. made a small donation to an organisation, signed a petition, volunteered for a couple of hours, etc. Nonetheless, for the purpose of a clear-cut analysis, we decided that young people active in only one or two such limited actions (that require little time and effort) are included in the group of the non-engaged individuals, together with those who did not participate *at all*.

### **Patterns of non-participation**

The question is now *why* these young people are not participating. As expected, we encountered several explanations in the interviews, of which the most dominant ones were: the lack of resources necessary for participation (i.e. interest, knowledge, personal efficacy), the lack of mobilisation, the lack of time, and a high degree of criticism or cynicism towards the political system. These different reasons for non-engagement, lead us to discern three different disengagement types, some of whom are deeply rooted in non-participation, whereas others have the potential to take action-we distinguish between the types of the *critical*, the *deprived* and the *potential* disengaged. As we will see, the *criticals*, as well as the *deprived* (i.e. those lacking resources) are not likely to participate at

all, compared to the participants lacking timing or mobilisation, who might have the *potential* to “tune back in”. We now take a closer look at these types and their respective explanation for non-participation.

The *criticals*, a group that includes youth who are highly critical or cynical, seem to be completely alienated by politics and thus do not voice any desire to participate. The more critical individuals, compared to the more cynical ones, nonetheless give some importance to the political system, and feel an obligation to vote. The *deprived* also prove to be set in their patterns of disengagement (apart from voting) as they lack most of the necessary resources for participation: lack of political and societal knowledge, lack of efficacy, etc. Only those interviewees who simply do not have time or mobilisation opportunities tend to show a clear potential to become engaged in a near future. They know how to be involved and it is indeed important to them to be engaged in society, but the timing and opportunities might not favor their potential.

The findings from these types of the disengaged seem to suggest that political resources are indeed necessary for participation, but they might not be sufficient. Before getting involved, a resourceful person still needs to have some free time (or willingness to make time), and needs to know how and where she can engage for a cause. Hence, it is confirmed that the civic education programs are necessary, as they provide youth with some knowledge and competences in order to favor participation. But the answer to youth’s non-participation cannot only be addressed by civic education. Potentials, who simply seem to lack the time and opportunities to become active, might just need to be presented with direct opportunities, e.g. they need to come into contact with the right person, network or organisation at the right time. One possibility might be that non-governmental organisations visit schools more often to present their activities, and maybe emphasise the fact that some actions do not require much time at all.

It is now important to have an idea as to how these types of non-participants spread out across the youth population and which attitudinal variables are related to these types. The quantitative analysis in the following section might give some answers.

### Quantitative analysis

If we want to delve deeper into the causes of non-engagement and its consequences for democracy, we first need to distinguish the disengaged from the engaged, to get a general picture of the entire group as a whole.

The first thing to note is that there are strong differences between the engaged and the disengaged. For example, females are less frequently non-engaged; the disengaged have overall fewer books at home; French speakers are also less engaged than Anglophones; and those living in urban areas are also more represented among the disengaged. At the level of political and social attitudes, we find that, compared to the engaged, the disengaged are less trusting of governmental institutions and of other citizens, they read the news less frequently, and have significantly less political interest. Interestingly, political knowledge, the belief that political parties represent youth, and the belief in strong leadership models of democracy, do not significantly distinguish the engaged from the disengaged; these unexpected findings hint at the fact that the group of the disengaged is more heterogeneous than originally understood. When looking at socialising factors (like school and personal networks), we can see that homogeneous social networks foster disengagement, and that all school factors matter to prevent disengagement (i.e. community service, invited speakers, and government visits), thus confirming that civic education plays an important role in fostering engagement and societal orientations.

The insights of our interview analysis though was that there are perhaps different types of the disengaged that we ought to theoretically and empirically distinguish. Thus we now turn to the

three different types of the disengaged (the *criticals*, the *deprived*, and the *potentials* – a categorization based on their political interest and knowledge) to examine their attitudinal profile and estimate the consequences for democracy. The deprived, who we defined as youth with low or no political interest and very low political knowledge, comprise about 25% of the disengaged in the Canadian youth sample. A second group is what we have called the *criticals*, who know a lot about politics but state that they have no interest in it. Within the interview participants as well as in our survey they are a very small share of the overall disengaged (only 9% of the disengaged). However, the group of the *potentials* are about two thirds and thus represent the majority of the disengaged in our Canadian survey.

We further make distinctions between *semi* and *high potentials*. With regards to political attitudes, we find some confirmations that *high-potentials* are similar to the engaged. They significantly read more news than other disengaged, and they do not trust government more or less than other disengaged. The *criticals* and the *deprived* trust institutions less and the deprived believe more frequently that a strong leader is good for democracy, indicating that their democratic attitudes differ from the other disengaged. There are no differences across the major types of disengaged with regard to trust in people and external efficacy. For socialising factors, we find that an environment that is politically diverse relates strongly and positively to being a *potential*, compared to other disengaged; whereas political and socio-economic homogeneity both foster the *deprived* type, indicating that some forms of homogeneity have potentially demobilizing effects. When looking into the future and the intentions of political participation, we notice that once more the *deprived* and the *criticals* plan the fewest political actions in the future; whereas the *semi-potentials* and especially the *high-potentials* score clearly much higher on future political action than the other disengaged. This clearly indicates that the potential types are very much influenced by their current circumstances and at least intend to participate

later on, although not as much as the engaged. In sum, there is a significant difference between the planned future political actions of the engaged versus those of the potentials.

## Conclusion

Our analyses have shown that the disengaged are not a homogeneous group, and most importantly, a large majority of them seem to have a potential to get engaged in society. We thus believe that any policy solutions that attempt to address the issue of non-engagement should include this more differentiated view, and develop suitable mobilisation strategies to tune these different groups back into politics. The *potentials* should be easy to reach when targeted at the right moment and offered time-limited opportunities to get involved.

The *deprived* simply need more political information which is best provided through civic education initiatives. However, cynicism and critical attitudes around politics are far less wide-spread than originally believed, at least in this Canadian sample. Mobilising them into action would require a stronger reaction from the political system and a more youth-oriented policy-focus.

## Note

- 1 This article is a summary of the paper titled “Who are these young people that do not participate” presented at the International Conference “Youth and Politics: Strange Bedfellows? Comparative Perspectives on Political Socialization” organized by the “Comparative Youth Survey” Project of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) from 3 – 4 July 2008 in Bruges, Belgium.

## Pourquoi les jeunes citoyens se tiennent à l'écart de la politique

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L'insuffisante participation des jeunes à la politique est un sujet omniprésent dans les sciences sociales et les médias. Depuis fort longtemps en fait, les jeunes font l'objet de ce reproche par comparaison aux cohortes plus anciennes. Ils ont toujours été décrits comme moins engagés et moins impliqués dans les processus décisionnels publics. Par rapport aux groupes plus âgés, les jeunes semblent tout simplement prendre davantage de distance par rapport à la politique ; cet effet lié au cycle de vie fait aujourd'hui l'objet d'une large documentation dans les sciences sociales.

Récemment pourtant, une nouvelle observation a été faite. En fait, la jeune génération actuelle est considérablement moins engagée que les

générations précédentes au même âge. Autrement dit, des effets générationnels viennent s'ajouter au fait que les jeunes générations d'aujourd'hui sont dépeintes comme particulièrement désenchantées par les processus politiques. Le déclin global de la participation politique dans de nombreuses démocraties occidentales s'explique dans une large mesure par le désengagement disproportionné de la jeune génération.

Nos analyses ont mis en évidence que les jeunes désengagés ne forment pas un groupe homogène et, plus important encore, qu'une grande majorité d'entre eux semblent avoir un potentiel pour s'engager.

## Warum junge Bürger sich von Politik fernhalten

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Die fehlende Beteiligung von jungen Menschen in der Politik ist ein endemisches Thema der Sozialwissenschaften und der allgemeinen Medien. Seit der Antike waren junge Menschen im Vergleich zu älteren Altersgruppen aber auch immer das Ziel von Wehklagen. Sie wurden als weniger engagiert und am öffentlichen Entscheidungsprozess beteiligt beschrieben. Junge Menschen scheinen im Vergleich zu älteren Altersgruppen einfach zur Politik eine größere Distanz zu halten. Dieser Effekt im Lebenszyklus ist von den heutigen Sozialwissenschaften gut dokumentiert worden.

In jüngster Zeit hat sich jedoch eine neue Einsicht herausgebildet, d.h. die Tatsache, dass die heutigen jungen Generationen auch im

Vergleich zu älteren Generationen im gleichen jugendlichen Alter wesentlich weniger engagiert sind. Mit anderen Worten: es gibt zusätzliche Generationseffekte, die die heutigen jungen Generationen als vom politischen Prozess besonders wenig berührt darstellen. Der allgemeine Rückgang an der politischen Beteiligung in vielen westlichen Demokratien ist damit im großen Maße durch den überproportionalen Mangel an Engagement der jungen Generationen zu erklären.

Unsere Analysen haben gezeigt, dass die Nicht-Engagierten keine homogene Gruppe sind und – was noch wichtiger ist – eine große Mehrzahl von ihnen das Potenzial aufweist, sich in der Gesellschaft zu engagieren.